Eleanor Robson, Who Made a Dialect

Her Manufactured Somersetshire So Like the Real That Nobody Criticised

It is only two years since Eleanor Robson had the mumps. This is important because it emphasizes the fact of her extreme youth.

As she sits in the flood of noonday sunshine in her apartment in West Seventieth street, flanked on one side by her King Charles spaniel and with dozens of photographs showing her in her different rôles of *Mary Ann, Juliet, Audrey* and *Constance* on the desk before her, she does not look a day over eighteen. Her resemblance to Julia Marlowe is striking; they might be real sisters as well as sisters in the profession.

She has big, grayish-blue eyes, a refined, delicate oval of a face, ending in the suspicion of a dimple in the chin. Her hair is a soft brown, parted simply and coiled Madonna fashion. She wears a short dark walking skirt and a shirt waist with a low turnover collar, fastened with an old fashioned brooch.

MISS ELEANOR ROBSON.

So closely has she been identified with the rôle of *Mary Ann* that there are many times during the interview when it seems, with only a slight stretch of the imagination, that this is the veritable little slavey, grown six years older and six years wiser than when she washed stairs in a London lodging house. You wait to hear her discuss Ibsen, or was it Maeterlinck toward whom *Merely Mary Ann* gravitated during her mental polishing?

Young as Eleanor Robson is, she has other distinctions besides that of having made a great success in her profession.

She admits, shyly but firmly and uncompromisingly, that she is the maker of a dialect on which she has no copyright, but which has never elicited unfavorable comment.

"When I first began to play *Mary Ann*," Miss Robson explains, "I realized that as *Mary*, the little slavey, was a Somersetshire girl, of course there was nothing for her to do but to speak with a Somersetshire dialect. I went over the list of my acquaintances, but not one of them had such a dialect in her outfit; then I put people on the trail of domestic agencies, thinking there might be such an importation from that particular section of England. I was hoping that I could get a housemaid with the requisite little burr. Disappointment.

"I began to haunt libraries on the trail of fiction whose backgrounds were the Somersetshire country; again disappointment. The nearest I could come along that line was the work of Thomas Hardy.

"I studied Hardy, morning, noon and night; he was propped up before me at breakfast, I ate my luncheon with a volume surreptitiously in my lap: I lived Hardy, thought Hardy, ate Hardy. The result is that I evolved a dialect toward which the people here acted most kindly and charitably. Not once did I hear jests or unfavorable comments upon it. I might have been born in Somersetshire myself.

"I doubt very much whether *Mary Ann* would have ever lost that *zed* when she became educated. I think one of the most noticeable lingual truths is that people almost never lose their peculiarity of accent; it becomes modified often by a change or residence and in the case of an uneducated person it is softened, but there is always the trace of it, especially in moments of great feeling or excitement, when people revert to their natural mode of expression. However, I was not brave enough to attempt to make her speak with just that suggestion of accent which would have been necessary. So I dropped it altogether, and, to my way of thinking, that is the one artistic blunder in the piece.

"Perhaps," she continues, with a slight widening of the already very wide opened eyes, "you think it is an easy task to prepare a ready made dialect. You just try it. Try writing a book and making your characters converse in a speech of which you have no idea, and then wait for favorable criticisms.

"Naturally, not being able to discover any of the Somersetshire material to study here at first hand, I imagined that when I began to play Somersetshire people would crop up all over the country ready to pounce upon me. But time passed on and nothing happened, and after a while I took heart again.

"But when I went to London all my fears returned. I was to meet Somersetshire on its native ground and have it out. I quaked inwardly. It is all right to try a ready made dialect on New Yorkers.

"Nothing but daily rides on the tops of buses would satisfy Miss Dwyer. We would take one where the seat next the driver was vacant, slip into it and then an agonized look would begin to creep over her face. At first we simply could not understand a word, and when we compared the real cockney article with the nice, little ladylike one Miss Dwyer had been using in New York, we didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Finally we got so we could understand a little, and every day Miss Dwyer would become more and more cockneyized.

"I soon made up my mind that my Somersetshire dialect would have to do and did not worry any more, so while the driver was pointing out places of interest and telling us bits of history, I enjoyed myself immensely; but my companion was oblivious of everything but those wonderful and people in other towns where you play, some of whom may not even be aware that there is such a place as Somersetshire, but there I was helpless, with a ready made dialect, and Somersetshire only a few miles away.

"But to my surprise I discovered that Londoners were just as ignorant of the fine points of the Somersetshire dialect as my own countrymen. My readymade dialect again worked to a charm. No one treated it in any way but seriously. In fact, many of the press comments were most favorable to my 'realistic touches and complete mastery of a difficult brogue.'

"My friend Miss Dwyer, who takes the part of the landlady, also had troubles of her own. She has a fine cockney accent for her part. All went well with it in New York. The average New Yorker's idea of the cockney accent is to be careless with your h's, take an extra supply for the day and just sprinkle them here and there. But there are fine shades and suggestions in the cockney dialect, and when you get near the sound of Bow Bells the horror of trying your own idea of its intricacies may well overcome a timid soul.

"syllables; she would sit with her eyes glued to the driver's lips, her own muttering 'Iidy' and 'Oi sye' over and over. Whether she was in Piccadilly or Kensal Green, she had no idea. What she wanted was the cockney accent.

"A masculine friend on the stage, who saw us in the first days of our arrival in London and to whom we explained that our agonized expressions meant the worry of Somersetshire and Bow Bells combined, told us to take heart. I believe now that what he said is true, that absolute verity is not always appreciated across the foot-lights. If I wanted further evidence of this truth, my ready made accent would do.

"He had a small part which was really only a make-up part. He was to take the rôle of an old English lawyer. To get the right character he used to go day after day to the Inns of Court and study the barristers at work. One day he came across the strangest old man, wizened, back bent, a queer wig and general appearance that would have delighted Dickens. Our friend studied him carefully, used to watch him at work, walking, resting, talking.

"He had a wig made like his, copied his clothes, his accent, really made a most exhaustive and artistic study of the person. The stage manager was simply furious at the absurdity of the character, told him that it was an exaggeration, that nobody ever did or ever had seen such a make-up. Not a word of praise was given him by anybody. He had spent days, vitality, and gone to great expense for nothing; he could just as well have made up a character without stirring out. Probably he would have been praised for it."

Miss Robson makes a short mental step from the accent to her London reputation.

"I was most graciously received and never had a single unfavorable notice, but I am very much in doubt as to whether a London reputation helps an American actress. I don't say that it does not; possibly it does. I only say I am not convinced that it does.

"I do not observe that American audiences are interested in the fact. If they like you they like you. If you go over there and stay a long time, it seems to me that they might forget you here.

"My firm conviction, if I had to express one, would be that the benefit you get is merely the artistic benefit that comes from any experience that is new and developing; that helps your work and so must in time make you more valuable to the public, but as for the quick box office return of that experience, I have yet to see and be convinced of it.

"The theatres over there are quite different from ours in detail, and I must say that the effect of finish, of careful workmanship, of a minute attention to comfort and convenience is evident there, as in all phases of English life.

"For example, I know only two theatres here that have the system of callboys. They are the New Amsterdam and the New Lyceum, and I understand that Mr. Blinn, who plays *Napoleon* in "The Duchess of Dantzic" and is also stage manager at Daly's, has introduced the innovation.

"It certainly is a great help, for you have absolutely no responsibility. Here, when you are on the stage, very much as I am, for example, in *Mary Ann*, you don't dare go away from your vantage point for fear of having a stage wait. With the callboy system that is completely obviated.

"The little chap we had over there was most amusing. He looked exactly like the pictures of Buster Brown's companion, and was quite alive to the seriousness and responsibility of his position. I used to hear him coming toward my dressing room, and then he would call out:

"'It's gettin' near yer, Miss Robson.'

"After a bit I would hear him on his second round, when he would call, 'It's near yer, Miss Robson.'

"The third time would come a quick, sharp, 'Miss Robson!' and I knew then that I was to appear.

"Another change in method is in shifting the scenery. Here we have perhaps five men to do the work, where over there they would have twenty-five. Every man has his special line of work, and nine chances to ten when you ask a man to shift a piece of furniture he will inform you very courteously that it is not his work. The man who places the scenery would not think of moving the piano, for example, and if it should be late in the afternoon and the piano man is out for his cup of tea—a custom which nothing human could or would have the temerity to attempt to cut out—why, you wait until the piano man returns.

"The same specialization runs through all classes of work. You ask your housemaid to do something in the storm and stress of an emergency and she looks at you politely, but with the politeness of adamant, and says:

"'It's not my work mim, that's the bupper 'ousemaid's.'

"You feel as if the whole British Empire would topple did you insist.

"Here we have possibly one dress rehearsal, and then it might happen that many of the 'props' would not be on hand. Over there for at least two weeks before a play is produced there is a complete rehearsal, every 'prop' is in its place and is used as it is in the play.

"I know one piece where a man breaks a cup during a moment of excitement; for two weeks, sometimes with two rehearsals a day, a cup was broken at that point in the play. It is easy to see how such extraordinary care results in a finish of acting and of detail which is conspicuous by its absence with us.

"The audiences there are not impatient of long waits, for a lack of impatience in all things is a keynote of conduct and life. As a matter of fact, though, that perfection of workmanship results in their waits really being shorter than ours."

With the close of the winter season Miss Robson will have given more than 600 performances of "Merely Mary Ann." "That does not seem so many times when you compare it, for instance, with Miss Adams's production of 'The Little Minister,' she says, "but when it comes to realizing that I have to study my lines again it seems a great many." For that reason she is looking forward to the production of "She Stoops to Conquer," which will fill in the spring season, as a recreation.

As to her favorite part, "of course I like *Mary Ann*," she says. Then she admits a love for *Juliet*—"my old Shakespearian rôle—greater than any other."

The last question concerns the King Charles curled in a radiant corner of the divan.

"What's his name?" was asked guiltily.

"I had a luncheon," answers Miss Robson grimly, "to celebrate his christening and every one there had to suggest a name. I wish you could have heard them, all the Ernest Maltraverses and Claude Melnottes of tradition. I suppose it was the reaction. We call him Jack.

MISS ROBSON AS JULIET.

IN "MERELY MARY ANN."

JACK IN THE HANDS OF HIS LEADING LADY.

A SPRINGTIME FRENCH SOUP.

Now on the Bills of Fare in the Restaurants —Spring Mushrooms.

The soup of the springtime in southern France is already within the reach of those who have learned of its existence—and all of them like it. Tourin Marseillaise is one of those things that are loved as soon as they are known. It is a simple soup to make, and the vegetable that forms its chief ingredient is now at hand. All the French restaurants are announcing it.

It must be made of tomatoes. They may come from Florida or from a greenhouse. It is not to be duplicated by any such substitute as tinned tomatoes or even those put up in glass. The fresh fruit must be stewed in hot water, to which one-half the quantity of rich beef stock has been added.

Care must be taken not to let the tomatoes become too well done and lose their fresh taste and appearance. The flavoring is of a kind that may always be suspected when the words Marseillaise, Provençal or Bordelaise are used in describing a dish.

The flavoring is, to be frank and to the point, garlic. A few scallions added to the soup make it better, and the amount of garlic must, of course, be kept down to what the persons eating the dish happen to like. It is always good advice to Americans to limit strictly the amount of the flavoring.

The hothouse tomatoes have much more flavor of the vegetable that those grown in the South. They are more costly and are readily distinguishable from the fact that the blackish green stems always cling to them, while the color is also deeper. They are much better in the preparation of all cooked dishes than the Florida article, which has little flavor by the time it has travelled so far.

The mushrooms in the market now are sometimes a trial to persons who think that they lack the flavor of the real article. They are, of course, reared artificially and do not have the strong and peculiar flavor of the fresh mushroom.

But they may be readily improved by adding a little lemon juice after they have been cooked. This slight difference does wonders toward bringing out the flavor of the fungus.

Another method which some persons prefer is to stew with them a handful of the dried mushrooms which possess a strong flavor and are a welcome addition to the cooked mushrooms, as they so much improve the flavor. Because they are soft, they are not commonly regarded as so desirable. But when mixed with the fresh mushrooms in small quantities they are an improvement.

HOW INDIANS COMMUNICATE.

News Travels With Wonderful Rapidity Among the Red Men.

The rapidity with which the news of orders given out from the Union Indian agency and the Dawes commission spreads to the remotest corners of the Creek nation is a continual source of wonder to the Federal officials.

When, says the Kansas City *Journal*, the regulation compelling Indians to accept the pay for their land in installments of $10 a month was announced, it seemed that every Indian in the Creek country knew it at once, for the petitions for sale dropped off immediately. A few days ago, when the order was revoked and the Indian was allowed to pay for his land at the rate of $50 per month, practically everybody knew it the next day, and business in the Creek land sales department suddenly became lively again.

When it is remembered that there are several thousand full blood Indians in the Creek nation who cannot speak or read a word of English, and who have no way of learning the news of the day except by word of mouth, the speed with which intelligence is communicated to them is most remarkable. Most of the full bloods live in the hills and mountains, far from railroads, and in sections where daily or even weekly newspapers are seldom or never seen.

Gen. Pleasant Porter, chief of the Creek nation, and the best informed man in his tribe, when asked to explain the phenomenon, said significantly:

"It may be telepathy. Let me ask you a question. How does the buzzard flying through the air learn that an animal has been killed and why are there hundreds of them on the scene in less time than it takes to tell about it? You may call it instinct, or anything else you please, but the Indians keep as well posted on news that interests them as the newspaper reading white people.

"My people have formed the habit of communicating whatever interests them to their neighbors and asking them to pass it on. Every train that leaves Muskogee is loaded with Indians who know personally of an order. They pass the word along, and it spreads like wildfire. In the early days the Creeks had regular couriers who carried the news. One of these would visit a town, and at sundown the people would gather around him and hear the information he had to impart. The town king would then detail some one to pass it on to the members of the next town or tribe, and the same method would be repeated.

"I have known," said the chief, growing reminiscent, "of foot carriers travelling 100 miles a day with important messages. One morning during the Creek rebellion I sent a messenger out to get volunteers for my army, and before the sun set 1,200 men came into my camp.

"Warriors had a way of announcing the approach of an enemy by giving war whoops. If the yells followed closely one after another the enemy was near. One prolonged whoop indicated that the enemy was many miles distant, with no danger of immediate attack."

Will One Line Long.

Martinsburg correspondence Baltimore Sun.

The shortest will ever offered for probate in this State was admitted to record in the office of County Clerk Bender yesterday.

It is by William Bear, disposes of an estate of several thousand dollars and is evidently directed to his son. It reads: "S. I. Bear, when I am dead see what is left, devide it. William Bear." The will is written on a soiled piece of paper, evidently torn from a notebook, and is written with a lead pencil.